Louise van Rhyn
Founder and Director
Symphonia
Symphonia is an Organisational Change practice based in Cape Town. The organisation comprises of 3 parts: Symphonia Leadership Development, Symphonia Consulting and Symphonia for South Africa, a Non-Profit Organisation. What makes them different from other practices in trying to strengthen the fabric of South Africa’s society? Management Today recently spoke to Louise van Rhyn, founder and Director, about this very dynamic organisation.

Louise won the HR Leadership Award at the World HRD Congress in 2009 for her leadership and contribution to the field of HR. She also won the Feather Award in the category of Entrepreneurial Woman in 2009. Ben Zander has described Louise as, “…a firebrand. No hurdle is too great, no task too complicated. When someone combines, in equal measure, passion, vision, enthusiasm, judgement and follow-through, the world shifts. Louise van Rhyn is a living commitment to shifting the world”.

But how did it all start?

“I went to work in the UK after I completed my MBA. There I experienced the best of the best in terms of leadership development and change management – skills I felt were critically important in South Africa. I realised that there was an opportunity for me to develop these skills here and decided about 7 years ago to return. Since then I have worked actively and enthusiastically to plough back what I had learnt. I think we have increased the capacity in information and knowledge in South Africa, specifically around Neuroleadership”.

Neuroleadership is a field of study focused on bringing neuroscientific knowledge into the areas of leadership development, management training, change management, education, consulting and coaching. It sheds light on how leaders can enhance their thinking, strengthen their ability to influence others and help staff successfully work through change.

Symphonia offer courses that centre on neuroscience. They create leaders that maximize the talent, human energy and creativity in their respective organisations. “We are working towards a world where organisational membership enables people to live lives that matter. That starts by creating opportunity for all the voices to be heard. Neuroleadership is not a methodology that you can teach in a couple of days. It is the most prolific area in science today. My advice would be to attend a foundational course. Once you have a basic understanding of the idea stay informed of the new research that is being done” comments Louise.

And being a woman in this very dynamic field?

“I don’t necessarily think men and women are wired differently, but I’ve had to do things that most men would never have to do. I’ve had to take care of my sick child one minute and partake in a conference call with international CEO’s the next minute. I think men on the corporate ladder lead more compartmentalised lives. Especially compared to a woman who is ambitious, cares deeply about her children and who wants to make a contribution to development in South Africa. I also think women are emotionally more willing to bring all of who we are to the situation. Men are socialised to be serious and all about business whereas women seem to be able to have fun while doing important work. I facilitate a leadership course called Flawless Consulting. All of us have finite brain capacity and all of us spend some of that capacity on maintaining these masks. It is so rewarding to share with people that it is acceptable to be real. And then to see how people’s creativity increases exponentially when they stop spending all that energy on maintaining their masks”.

Louise recently stepped down from her position as CEO. “It has been the most daunting thing for me to step down. I thought everything would fall to pieces without
me being at the helm. It was part of my own inflated sense of capability and importance and it was holding me back from what I really wanted to focus on. About 18 months ago we created an opportunity for business leaders to contribute to the development of school principals. The mechanics were that we paired an experienced business leader with a principal. We shifted the approach away from the traditional fix, tell, guide and direct to a more holistic one of being interested, curious, present and available. In this process we have started to create more compassion than blame. While we continue to blame, to criticize and judge we will not see changes in people’s brain function. With compassion we have changed the flight-and-fight mode to one of being real and creative.

Louise urges leaders to replace help with curiosity, “because when we become curious we discover so much more about people than when we have the answers and continuous learning is absolutely critical for any leader”.